



## **SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL MATTERS**

### **Inquiry Into The Delivery Of Electoral Education**

Submission from

**Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC)**

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## Introduction

The submission from the Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC) focuses mainly on electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers. It also comments on some of the issues involved in delivering electoral education to remote regions.

### 1 Electoral education services provided to schools, students and teachers

When compared to national averages, the Northern Territory (NT) experiences three particular issues: lower enrolment participation, lower voter turnout and higher informality in remote areas. Low levels of literacy and numeracy and geographic dispersion are contributing factors to these problems.

#### Enrolment

**Table:** Enrolment rate as a percentage of estimated eligible population (March 2015)

Age group	NT enrolment rate	National enrolment rate
Youth (18-25)	59.9%	79.8%
Non-youth (26+)	82.2%	94.9%
Total 18-70+	78.5	92.8

**Turnout** – overall turnout for the 2012 NT Legislative Assembly (LA) elections was 76.9% across 25 divisions, 62.0% in the seven remote divisions.

**Formality** – overall informality at the 2012 NT LA elections was 3.2%. The highest informality was in the remote divisions e.g. Stuart 5.9% (three candidates). Informality from remote mobile polling was 4.9% overall. Informality analysed in the remote divisions was on the whole uninformed and caused by marking a 1<sup>st</sup> preference only, duplicated or incomplete numbering or difficulties marking in sequential order.

Statistics for NT elections show that an elector from a remote region is half as likely to vote as an urban elector and, if lodging a ballot paper, twice as likely to mark it informally.

Electoral education programs can play an important role in reversing these trends, though the education sector has a significant role to play in literacy and numeracy levels.

One of the functions of the NTEC is:

*To promote public awareness of matters relating to elections and the Legislative Assembly by conducting education and information programs and in any other way it chooses. (Electoral Act (NT), section 309)*

The NTEC has 10 staff in its Darwin office; and two staff in the joint NTEC/Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) office in Alice Springs. The NTEC education program has two main components:

- In the lead up to and during elections, NTEC public awareness activities focus on enrolment, and how, when and where to vote - activities funded from within the election budget.
- Outside of elections, the education focus is more on the electoral system and practical voting exercises, primarily with school students; however, it does include new citizens, English as a Second Language (ESL)/migrant groups and legal/political studies students. Funding is made available from the normal appropriation budget.

Education sessions are conducted primarily in partnership with the Parliamentary Education Service (PES), a unit of the NT Legislative Assembly. The NTEC manages electoral education sessions when schools undertake a tour of Parliament House under the PES



school visitation program. The PES program links in with the Civics and Citizenship education program.

The program mainly operates for the Darwin/Palmerston area, however a number of schools from other urban centres and remote areas use the program during school excursions to the Top End. Under the partnership, the NTEC provides funding of \$15 000 per annum to PES for transporting students from rural and remote locations into Darwin. This has enabled students to attend sessions from locations such as Batchelor and Belyuen (Darwin rural area), Gunbalanya and Maningrida (West and East Arnhem land respectively) and Katherine.

The partnership with PES includes the delivery of a program entitled 'Democracy at Work', that emphasises the representative nature of democracy in Australia and highlights the functions and processes of government in parliamentary, electoral and court settings. The electoral session covers enrolment and voting processes, explanation of the three levels of government and the mechanics of running elections in the Northern Territory. A mock ballot is conducted to enable students to gain an understanding preferential voting.

The 'Step Up, Be Heard' program is aimed at Year 11 and 12 legal and political studies students, providing a hands-on learning experience about elections and how parliament operates:

- **Step Up** - concentrates on becoming a candidate for political office, forming political parties, developing policies and running an election campaign. The NTEC then guides students through a mock election to demonstrate how ballot papers are counted and preferences distributed.
- **Be Heard** - focuses on parliamentary features, processes and procedures. Students form a parliament with a government, opposition and independents. The government develops a bill and all students write and present a speech as part of a mock parliamentary debate conducted in the Chamber of Parliament House.

The partnership with the Legislative Assembly's education unit began in 2009 and, during the last three financial years, it has resulted in 374 electoral education sessions being conducted for 9506 students as part of the PES program. The arrangement has also resulted in interactions with 768 teaching staff.

**Table:** Education sessions and participants conducted by region 2012-2015 financial years

Group (by Region)	No. Sessions	No. Participants
Darwin	269	7 192
Katherine	4	132
Jabiru	3	41
Alice Springs	44	1 332
Remote	29	324
English as Second Language (ESL)	25	485
	<b>374</b>	<b>9 506</b>

The Alice Springs region is serviced by NTEC staff located in Alice Springs, trained in the delivery of electoral education sessions. They engage with local schools and visit them to conduct school elections and electoral education sessions.

The NTEC has:

- An annual presence on the NT shows circuit to provide the public with information of topical interest e.g. electoral events, redistributions, etc.
- A number of fact sheets available on its website, relating mainly to the NT electoral system for the LA and local government.



- Participated in the Electoral Educators Network, a national forum for exchanging ideas and evaluating concepts for electoral education for the Civics and Citizenship program. It also shares information and compares activities undertaken by each commission to engage with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) groups.

There is no specific program or allocated funding to provide electoral education to remote schools, others than those that travel to Darwin or Alice Springs as part of a school visitation program.

The AEC's Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP) has a number of staff based in its Darwin office to service the Northern Territory. Recently the program focus has changed and it no longer provides electoral education to remote schools, and visits urban schools infrequently. Schools are now directed to self-help online packages such as 'Democracy Rules' and 'Get Voting'. Whilst the availability of online electoral education resources is a very positive development, these generic programs may not be the most appropriate mechanism for engaging with remote area students. In 2014/15, seven Territory schools registered for the AEC's online education program, one of which was a remote school.

Though delivering face-to-face education visits to remote schools is resource intensive, the current generic online system is not being adopted by remote schools. Even if a targeted online program was developed for remote schools, there still needs to be support from appropriately trained electoral staff delivering electoral education sessions. For many decades the AEC used to have a field program that would maintain the roll in remote communities and conduct electoral awareness session. With the creation of the IEPP and the outsourcing of remote area roll review to the Department of Human Services, these student electoral education sessions are no longer conducted.

Given that remote NT schools are largely not using the AEC's online education program, consideration should be given to broaden the scope of the IEPP program to include the conduct of electoral education in remote areas.

## **2 The teaching methodology and results of the national Civics and Citizenship Curriculum**

Student learning, at whatever level, is fostered and stimulated by the person teaching the class. Should that person not have the right knowledge, tools and enthusiasm to engage the students, understanding of the subject matter may be markedly reduced.

It has often been noticed in sessions where there is a hands-on vote marking and counting exercise for students that the teaching staff themselves state their new comprehension of vote counting, previously merely assumed or understood in a theoretical rather than practical sense.

While the national curriculum may outline objectives for the topic and online support materials cover curriculum needs, there can be no replacement for in-depth knowledge to engender interest and respond to queries.

The tertiary curriculum for teachers can lack rigour and/or be cursory in addressing the electoral framework. Political scientists normally teach 'politics' as part of the social science discipline, but the electoral component may be non-existent or only a small part of the whole course. An 'academic' appreciation is no substitute for real understanding.

*It is suggested that any review of the civics/citizenship curriculum incorporates:*

- *Liaison with the tertiary sector over teaching methodology and content.*
- *The retention of the curriculum focus on governance structures at three levels (except for the ACT), bearing in mind that most primary and secondary students are most familiar with the local level. It is a challenge for any jurisdiction to be inclusive in its presentations, but compartmentalising information will have a deleterious effect on understanding how government systems in Australia are integrated.*



- *Liaison between the parliamentary, judicial and electoral management bodies in each jurisdiction to explain to students the democratic linkages in their relationships.*
- *A dynamic approach to school learning, including regular contact and updates for the education sector. Teachers can be on short or long term contracts and need to be able to readily access materials wherever they are posted. This can be a problem particularly in remote areas where internet access can be poor and intermittent, and smart boards, personal computers, printing and paper needs are in short supply.*

### **3 Evolving technology and new platforms for delivering electoral education**

At various times, the NTEC has used innovative techniques to engage with the electorate e.g. talking boards, looping commentary on portable CD players, a comic magazine 'Have Your Say', cartoon characters for advertising concepts, stylised graphics for representing different electorates on its website.

For today's audience, colour, voice and movement are the norms – short, attention grabbing messages and different messages according to the target,

Difficulties occur balancing the perceived intrusiveness of a personal approach using smart phones say, versus messaging multiple audiences e.g. at cinemas.

Website tools can include explanations of vote marking and counting. Pre-arranged sessions could be organised with students from school-of-the-air and remote schools using an electoral education specialist to take and answer questions.

The development of customised online programming for remote area schools should be considered, to run in tandem with the delivery of IEPP enrolment and education sessions.